DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 330 CS 211 389

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TITLE Reading Newspapers: The Practices of America's Young Adults. A Summary.
INSTITUTION Education Writers Association, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 20p.; Condensed version of a report presented at the Meeting of the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (Washington, DC, April 14, 1988).
AVAILABLE FROM Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 (first copy free; $3.50, after first copy; $10.00 for three).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Trends; *Literacy; Mass Media Role; *Mass Media Use; Media Research; *Newspapers; *Reading Habits; Reading Materials; Reading Material Selection; Television; *Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

Using the data base provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) through its literacy assessment of young adults, researchers probed the newspaper reading practices of 21-25 year olds. The 1985 survey used home interviews of 3,600 young adults in the 48 contiguous states, representative of the 21 million adults in this age bracket. The study examined the relationship of educational attainment to newspaper readership habits and the use of three primary communications media--television, books, and magazines; what young adults read; and how newspaper readership relates to the use of other media. Findings showed that (1) the level of education obtained by young adults was strongly related to how often they read newspapers; (2) daily readership was highest among males at 49%, compared to 41% for females; (3) the Northeast was the region with the highest daily readership in the country (54%); (4) more than 80% of young adults read news; (5) the highest percentage (85.8%) read content in the area of comics, television/movie listings, and classifieds; (6) young adults who reported reading news had a higher average reading proficiency than did those not reading news; and (7) neither television nor other print material compete, in any real sense, with newspaper readership. However, those who did not read news were more inclined to be heavy television watchers. (Three tables of data and four figures are included.) (MS)

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A SUMMARY OF

READING NEWSPAPERS: THE PRACTICES OF AMERICA'S YOUNG ADULTS

a report by

Irwin S. Kirsch
Ann Jungeblut
Donald A. Rock

prepared for the Literacy Committee of
the American Society of Newspaper Editors

This summary, by the Education Writers Association (EWA), is based on the authors' full report, Reading Newspapers: The Practices of America's Young Adults, commissioned by EWA for presentation on April 14, 1988, at a meeting of the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

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The Education Writers Association, founded in 1947, is the professional association of education reporters and writers. Its project on resources about literacy was established to help journalists cover the issue of illiteracy/literacy in ways that reflect the complexities and far-reaching implications of the issue. The paper upon which this summary is based is one of several being commissioned during 1988 that deal with specific facets of literacy. This summary and the longer paper were first presented on April 14, 1988, at a meeting of the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors during the organization's national convention in Washington, D.C. Others analyze the relationships between literacy and poverty, the coverage of literacy/education in the current presidential campaign and math literacy in the United States. EWA maintains a clearinghouse of resources about literacy and publishes the monthly The Literacy Beat. The staff is prepared to help writers make contacts or otherwise obtain ideas and information about the issue of literacy. Please contact Lisa Walker, executive director, or Anne Lewis, consultant, at 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 429-9680.

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READING NEWSPAPERS:

THE PRACTICES OF AMERICA'S YOUNG ADULTS

Reading a newspaper at least once a week is a firmly imbedded habit of young adults in this country, according to a nationally representative sample of 21-25 year olds. Further, this holds true across the three major racial/ethnic subgroups—white, black and Hispanic. However, less than one-half of the sample reported reading newspapers daily.

Using the data base provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) through its literacy assessment of young adults, researchers probed the newspaper reading practices of this age group. The 1985 survey used home interviews of 3,600 young adults in the 48 contiguous states, representative of the 21 million adults in this age bracket.

The overwhelming majority (some 90%) of young adults reported reading a newspaper on a regular basis—at least once a week—with 45% reading a newspaper on a daily basis. Only 2% reported never reading a newspaper.

The study also examined the relationship of educational attainment to newspaper readership habits and the use of three other primary communications media—television, books and magazines. The analyses were conducted by Irwin Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut and Donald Rock for the Education Writers Association, in cooperation with the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Other findings of the initial question as to the prevalence of newspaper readership among young adults included:

- The level of education obtained by young adults was strongly related to how often they read newspapers. The percentage who reported reading a newspaper on a daily basis increased with each level of education completed. That is, 24% of those with eight years of schooling or less read a newspaper daily, as compared to 38% with some high school education, 41 percent of those with a high school diploma and 52 percent of those with college degrees.

- Daily readership was highest among males at 49%, compared to 41% for females.

- The Northeast was by far the region with the highest daily readership in the country (54%), with the Central and West about 10% behind. Daily readership in the South, however, was only 35.7%. Yet, when daily readership and readership of a few times a week are added together, the South pulls up closer to the readership in the Central and West regions. Newspaper reading definitely is a habit in the Northeast (82.7% read on a newspaper daily or a few times a week).

These finding suggest that:

- Young adults have access to and use a common body of broad and diverse information obtained through widespread readership of newspaper.

- Newspapers have a stake in the education of young adults.

Frequency is one way of looking at newspaper readership. Another is to examine what young adults read. This study grouped content into four major areas or "practices:" 1) editorials, international, national, state, and/or financial—in other words, news; 2) sports; 3) society columns, reviews, horoscopes; and 4) comics, TV/movie listings, and/or classified ads.

The data show that:

- More than 80% of young adults read news.

- The highest percentage read content in Practice 4 (comics, TV/movie listings, classifieds). This was 85.8%.

- Less than one-half (45%) reported reading sports. The disinterest of females brought this percentage down; only about 27% of females reported reading sports.

- About 63% reported reading content in Practice 3—society, reviews, and horoscopes.

- The most consistent and strongest relationship was that between level of education and the four types of content. As education increased, young adults reported more readership in each content area. For example, almost 92% of young adults with a college degree read news, compared to about 53% of those with less than eight years of schooling.

- There are small but significant differences in content choice by race/ethnic groups. While 84%

of white young adults read news, 80% of blacks did so. A higher percentage of young black adults read sports (52%) than did whites (45%) or Hispanics (43%).

These findings suggest that:

- Sections of newspapers have a stake in the education of young adults.

- On the other hand, by a narrow margin (2.4%), the sections that have the biggest draw for newspapers are those which provide utilitarian information (i.e., Practice 4 or comics, classified, TV/movie listing.

- Sports has more variation in readership than the other sections—high readership for blacks, low readership for females, increasing readership with increasing education.

The data also show strong relationships between literacy skills and readership habits of young adults. They do not establish causes for these links, however.

Reading proficiency scales were established by a National Assessment of Educational Progress in-school reading assessment. It is a numerical scale that corresponds to skills from rudimentary to advanced and consists of multiple choice questions used with reading materials used in schools.

- Young adults who reported reading news (Practice 1) had higher average reading proficiency than did those not reading news.

- For those with eight or fewer years of schooling, there was no difference in reading proficiency between those who did and those who did not read news.

- However, the racial/ethnic performances on reading proficiencies and their relationships to the reading of news could be seen as disturbing. Among those who reported reading news, the average in-school reading proficiency level for black young adults was at the average for eighth graders, that for Hispanic young adults was close to the eleventh-grade level, while that for white young adults was beyond the average for 11th graders.

- The reading proficiency of young adults who read other sections of the newspaper (practices 2, 3, 4) did not differ from those who didn't read those sections.

The data suggest that:

- The level of literacy is strongly associated with a reader's engaging in news.

- The lack of success in raising the literacy levels of young black adults is significant for the content of newspapers. While the news readership level for this group is close to other groups (at 80%), the reading proficiency level of young black adults with interest in news is significantly lower than all other groups. Furthermore, the reading proficiency level of young black adults who don't engage in reading the news is at a low 4th grade level.

One of the literacy skills assessed by NAEP was skill in using "documents," such as graphs, charts and the like. Practice 4, or comics, TV/move listings and classified ads, is the closest to document skills on the NAEP assessment. The data show that young adults who reported reading Practice 4 items also obtained higher average scores on the Document literacy scale than those who didn't read these sections.

This analysis also looked at how newspaper readership relate to the use of other media—television, book and magazine reading. Despite the warnings about "aliteracy," or those who can read but don't, this does not seem to be a major problem among young adults.

- Neither television nor other print material compete, in any real sense, with newspaper readership. For example, regardless of amount of TV watching or whether or not they read books or magazines, significant numbers of young adults report engaging in one or more of the newspaper practices.

- However, those who didn't read news were more inclined to be heavy TV watchers. A full 66% of those who didn't read the news watched three or more hours of television a day, as compared to 47% who did read the news.

- By contrast, not watching television may decrease the readership for certain sections of the paper. For example, 60% of those who watched two hours or less of TV a day did not engage in Practice 4 (comics, TV/movie schedules, classifieds).

- Those who read news had the highest in-school reading proficiency if they also read either magazines or books. In other words, those who read a lot, read better.

The data suggest that:

- Tying promotion of newspapers to TV/magazine ads might be a viable strategy to attract news readers.

Table 1
Percentages of Young Adults Who Reported
Reading Newspapers in English with Varying Frequencies

	Weighted N	Daily	Few Times Each Week	Once Each Week	Less Than Once a Week	Never
TOTAL	20,720,464	44.6 (1.2)*	31.1 (1.0)	14.5 (0.9)	7.8 (0.5)	2.0 (0.2)
GENDER						
Male	10,054,793	49.0 (2.0)	29.5 (1.7)	12.6 (1.3)	7.2 (0.9)	1.7 (0.3)
Female	10,665,671	40.5 (1.5)	32.7 (1.6)	16.2 (1.1)	8.4 (0.8)	2.2 (0.4)
REGION						
Northeast	4,448,158	54.0 (2.3)	28.7 (2.3)	9.8 (1.7)	6.3 (1.0)	1.2 (0.5)
Southeast	5,140,778	35.7 (1.4)	35.4 (2.6)	17.4 (2.2)	8.5 (1.2)	3.0 (0.5)
Central	5,364,920	45.4 (2.6)	30.5 (2.8)	13.9 (1.4)	8.5 (1.1)	1.7 (0.4)
West	5,766,608	44.7 (1.9)	29.7 (1.3)	15.9 (1.7)	7.7 (1.2)	2.0 (0.4)
RACE/ETHNICITY						
White	16,018,109	44.2 (1.4)	32.0 (1.4)	13.9 (1.0)	7.9 (0.6)	1.9 (0.3)
Black	2,693,192	45.9 (2.1)	27.4 (1.9)	17.1 (1.7)	7.3 (1.0)	2.2 (0.6)
Hispanic	1,264,984	46.2 (3.8)	26.2 (3.4)	15.9 (1.7)	8.0 (1.4)	3.7 (1.0)
EDUCATION						
0-8 years	374,926	23.9 (5.6)	20.7 (6.4)	22.4 (9.0)	19.9 (8.7)	13.2 (5.3)
9-12 years	2,769,840	38.5 (3.2)	31.2 (2.3)	16.9 (1.9)	9.9 (1.6)	3.5 (0.9)
H.S. Dip.	9,999,954	41.5 (1.9)	30.8 (1.8)	16.2 (1.3)	9.5 (1.0)	2.0 (0.4)
Degree	7,565,453	52.1 (2.2)	32.1 (2.0)	10.8 (1.3)	4.2 (0.7)	0.8 (0.3)
EMPLOYMENT STATUS						
Full-time, all yr	9,571,878	46.4 (2.1)	31.1 (1.6)	13.9 (1.5)	7.1 (1.0)	1.6 (0.3)
Part-time, all yr	2,816,437	47.1 (2.7)	30.6 (2.7)	13.9 (2.8)	6.6 (1.4)	1.8 (0.6)
Full-time, pt yr	3,703,890	43.3 (2.4)	33.2 (2.3)	14.9 (1.8)	7.1 (1.4)	1.5 (0.5)
Part-time, pt yr	1,761,586	43.9 (3.7)	30.3 (3.4)	13.9 (3.2)	9.4 (2.6)	2.5 (1.1)
Unemployed	402,744	39.7 (6.7)	28.3 (7.1)	19.1 (5.1)	9.0 (4.9)	3.8 (2.7)
In School	851,851	53.7 (6.7)	25.6 (5.5)	12.4 (2.9)	7.0 (1.8)	1.3 (1.1)
Keeping House	1,432,789	31.3 (3.3)	30.6 (3.8)	18.6 (3.2)	15.2 (2.6)	4.4 (1.2)

*The numbers in parentheses are estimated standard errors.

Table 2
Percentages of Young Adults Who Reported Regularly Reading Particular Content Areas in Newspapers *

	Weighted N	Practice 1**		Practice 2**		Practice 3**		Practice 4**	
TOTAL	20,720,464	83.4	(0.9)***	45.4	(1.6)	62.8	(1.3)	85.8	(0.9)
GENDER									
Male	10,054,793	84.4	(1.5)	64.6	(2.2)	51.8	(2.0)	85.1	(1.4)
Female	10,665,671	82.4	(1.0)	27.4	(1.6)	73.2	(1.3)	86.6	(0.9)
REGION									
Northeast	4,448,158	86.9	(1.5)	49.8	(2.2)	69.5	(2.8)	88.1	(2.1)
Southeast	5,140,778	80.9	(1.8)	41.0	(2.5)	59.5	(2.6)	85.3	(1.4)
Central	5,364,920	81.9	(2.2)	51.4	(3.8)	60.2	(2.8)	85.3	(1.9)
West	5,766,608	84.3	(1.5)	40.5	(2.5)	62.9	(2.3)	85.1	(1.6)
RACE/ETHNICITY									
White	16,018,109	84.1	(0.9)	44.7	(1.8)	62.0	(1.6)	86.0	(1.1)
Black	2,693,192	79.8	(1.8)	51.6	(2.8)	66.0	(3.2)	85.9	(1.3)
Hispanic	1,264,984	81.7	(2.1)	42.6	(3.1)	66.5	(3.3)	83.6	(2.0)
EDUCATION									
0-8 years	374,926	52.7	(6.9)	25.8	(5.2)	36.3	(5.7)	55.2	(7.2)
9-12 years	2,769,840	71.9	(2.1)	31.6	(2.8)	60.7	(3.0)	82.8	(1.7)
H.S. Dip.	9,999,954	81.3	(1.3)	41.9	(2.0)	60.3	(1.7)	84.6	(1.3)
Degree	7,565,453	91.8	(1.1)	56.2	(2.2)	68.2	(2.3)	90.2	(1.3)
EMPLOYMENT STATUS									
Full-time, all yr	9,571,878	90.1	(1.2)	50.9	(2.3)	68.2	(2.4)	89.4	(1.3)
Part-time, all yr	2,816,437	85.6	(1.2)	49.6	(2.1)	59.1	(1.8)	86.3	(1.3)
Full-time, pt yr	3,703,890	85.5	(2.1)	46.9	(3.7)	70.8	(2.8)	86.9	(1.8)
Parti-time, pt yr	1,761,586	85.8	(1.7)	47.6	(2.9)	66.5	(2.4)	88.8	(1.5)
Unemployed	402,744	78.2	(3.5)	43.7	(4.0)	63.1	(4.2)	84.9	(3.1)
In School	851,851	74.0	(7.7)	45.0	(8.0)	64.3	(7.8)	83.5	(7.5)
Keeping House	1,432,789	85.1	(3.5)	42.1	(4.8)	72.1	(4.3)	79.7	(4.4)

* Regular newspaper readers were those who reported reading with a frequency of at least once a week

** PRACTICE 1: Editorials, international, national, state, loca and financial news

** PRACTICE 2: Sports

** PRACTICE 3: Society, Reviews, or Horoscope

** PRACTICE 4: Comics, Classified, TV/Movie Listing

*** The numbers in parentheses are estimated standard errors.

Table 3
Percentages and Reading Proficiencies of Regular Newspaper Readers Who Reported Watching Various Amounts of TV and Whether or Not They Engaged in Each of the Four Newspaper Practices[1]

	Practice 1		Practice 2		Practice 3		Practice 4	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1 Hour or less	25.8%	16.0%	22.7%	27.5%	24.9%	25.4%	24.4%	38.7%
	312.9	272.7	313.0	309.4	311.8	309.5	311.4	306.1
	(36.2)[2]	(38.4)	(35.6)	(38.6)	(35.9)	(40.1)	(36.7)	(44.3)
2 Hours	27.2%	18.0%	32.8%	20.0%	24.8%	30.4%	26.6%	23.1%
	310.3	249.0	308.3	305.3	307.4	306.9	307.6	298.4
	(37.2)	(40.3)	(38.3)	(41.9)	(39.0)	(41.0)	(39.4)	(46.1)
3-4 Hours	32.0%	39.0%	31.5%	33.4%	33.5%	30.1%	32.8%	26.3%
	298.7	259.3	295.4	295.0	296.1	292.9	295.8	280.2
	(40.4)	(38.7)	(42.5)	(41.1)	(42.0)	(41.1)	(41.9)	(36.2)
5+ Hours	15.1%	27.0%	13.0%	19.1%	16.8%	14.1%	16.2%	11.9%
	278.7	249.9	274.1	275.8	276.1	272.2	275.7	258.7
	(37.1)	(39.6)	(38.5)	(38.7)	(37.5)	(41.4)	(38.8)	(29.6)

[1] Practice 1: Editorials; international, national, state, local, and/or financial news.

Practice 2: Sports.

Practice 3: Society, reviews, or horoscopes.

Practice 4: Comics, TV/movie listings, classifieds.

[2] The numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Figure 1:
Relationships Among Reading Proficiencies and Whether or Not Young Adults Engaged in Practice One

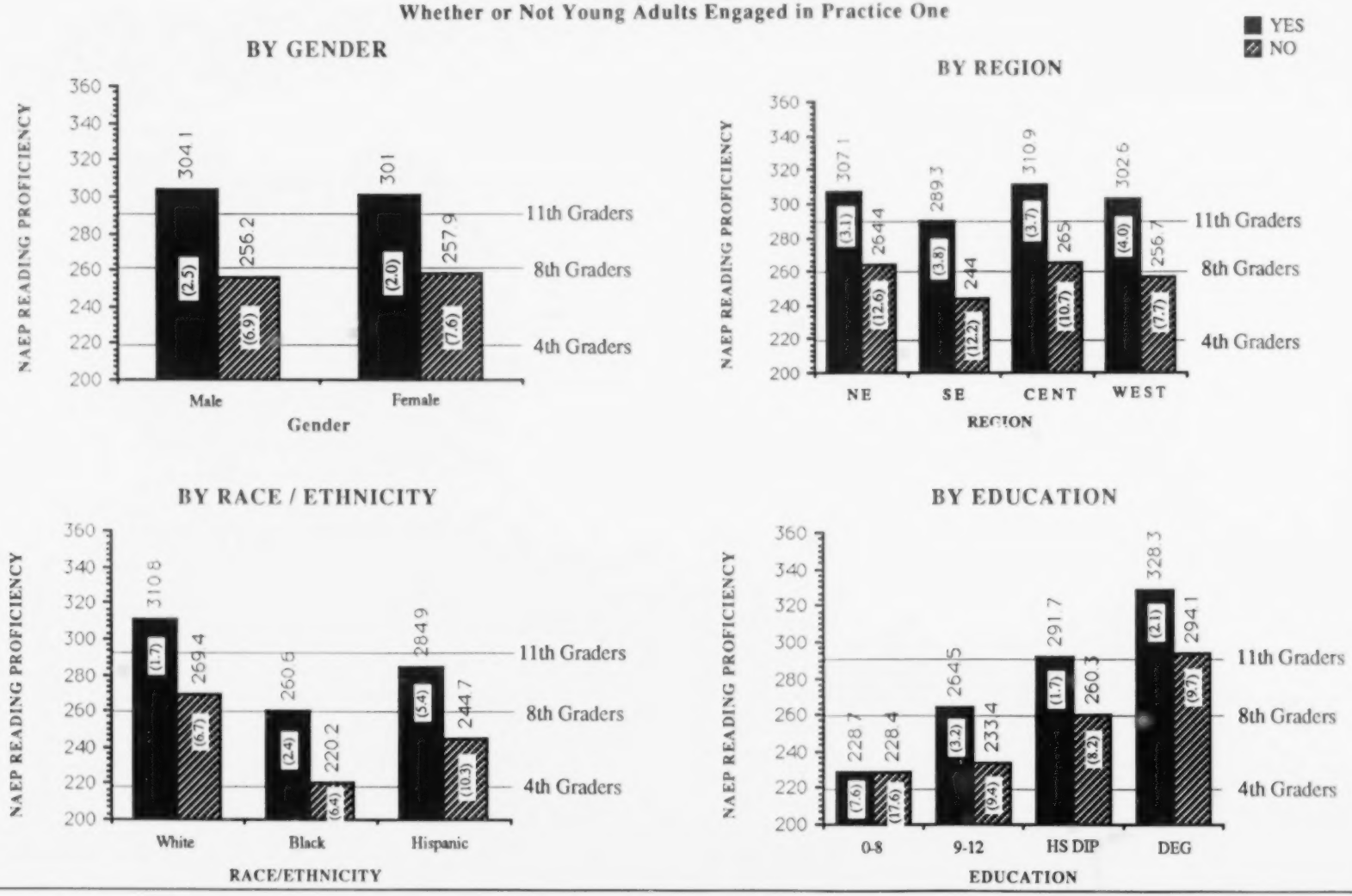


Figure 2:
Relationships Among Reading Proficiencies and Whether or Not Young Adults Engaged in Practice Two

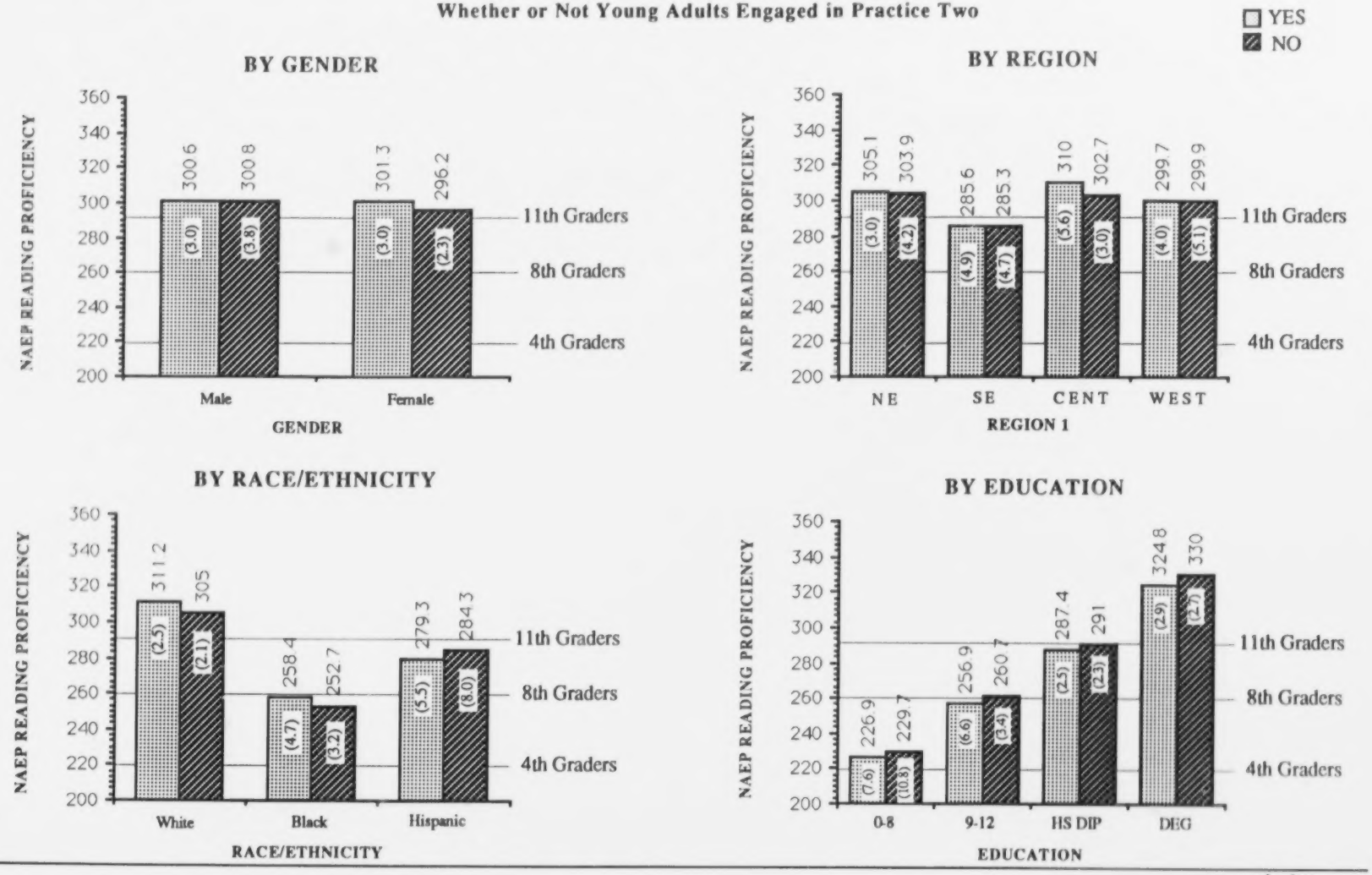


Figure 3:
Relationships Among Reading Proficiencies and Whether or Not Young Adults Engaged in Practice Three

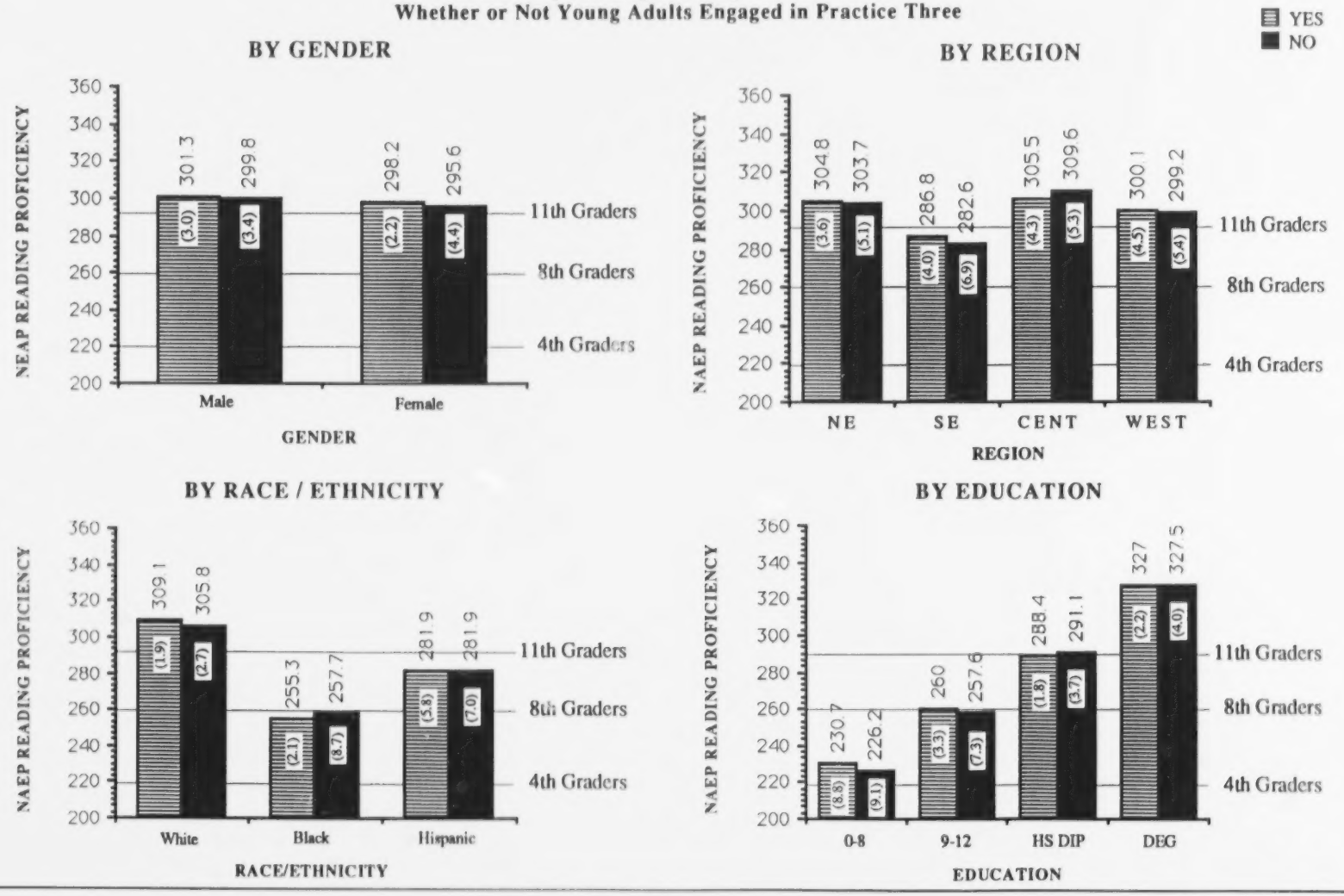
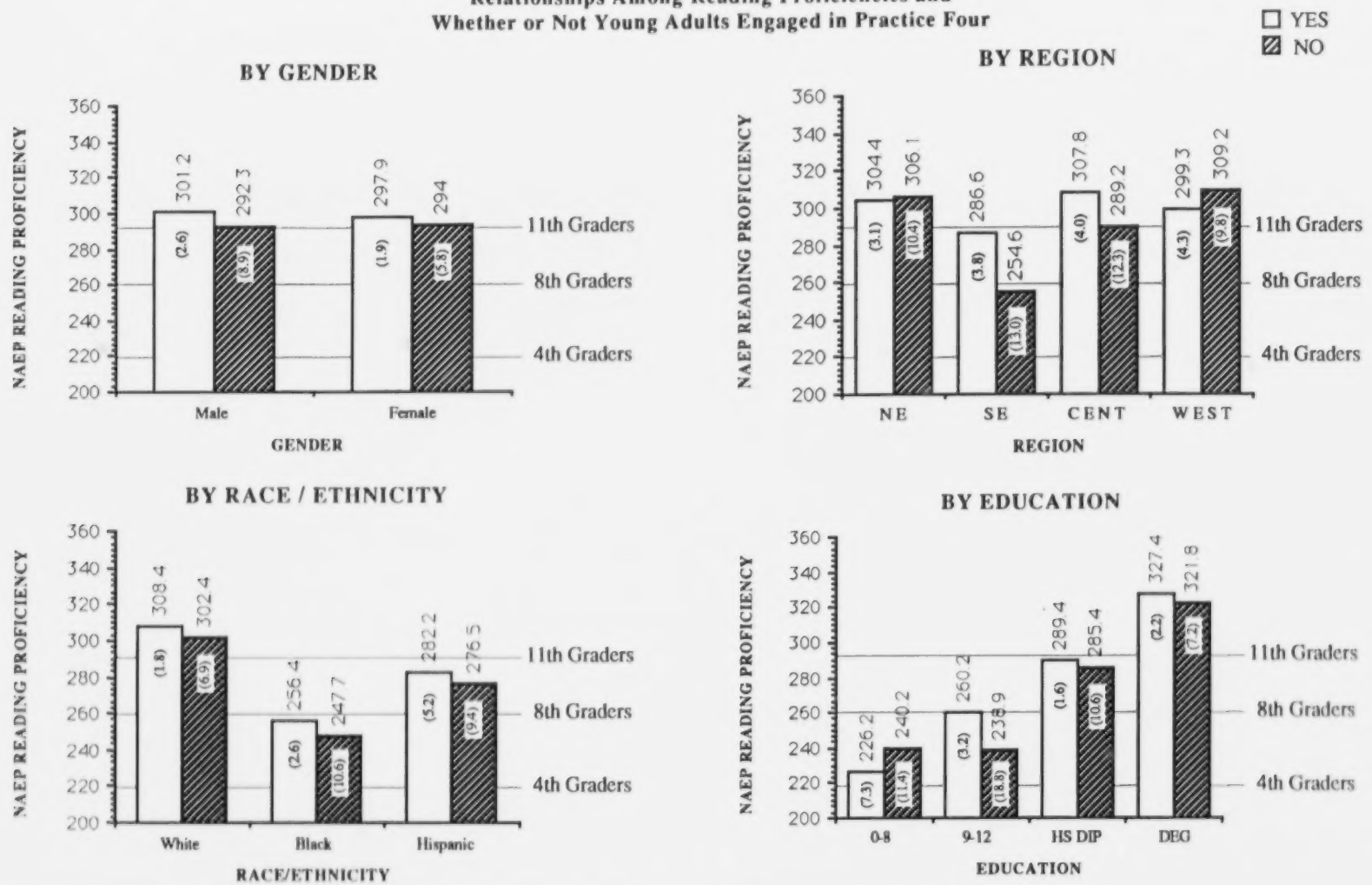


Figure 4:
Relationships Among Reading Proficiencies and Whether or Not Young Adults Engaged in Practice Four



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